

TASK FORCE PLANS WASHINGTON SEMINAR

The 1970 White House Conference on Children concluded that "America's families and their children are in trouble, trouble so deep and pervasive as to threaten the future of the nation. The source of the trouble is nothing less than a national neglect of children and those primarily engaged in their care -- America's parents." This concern for the welfare of the family is being echoed within Mennonite congregations. Lorene R. Buhr, 309 Carleton Dr., Saskatoon, Sask. writes: "The family is under extreme stress, and it behooves us as a church to do whatever we can to maintain this Christian institution."

The MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society, in conjunction with the Peace Section Washington Office, will be conducting a two-day seminar, May 7-8, on the pressures facing families. Family, as defined by the Task Force, is the human community through which persons experience love, trust, and security; develop responsibility; learn ethical values; and acquire a sense of continuity with the past and a sense of commitment to the future. In a world becoming increasingly impersonal, the family may be one of the few places where a person is loved not for what s/he does or makes but simply for what s/he is. This definition does not limit family to the traditional nuclear structure but incorporates the diverse and variant family forms found in our pluralistic society.

In order to complement church conference workshops and take advantage of the Washington setting, the seminar will focus primarily on the effect of government decisions on the family. Standing at the center of all other institutions, the family is continually influenced by the policies of government. The stability of family life is being eroded by welfare regulations which stipulate that assistance can only be given if a father is not in the home. A freeway cuts a community in half and leaves once happy homes abandoned and burning. The Supreme Court decision makes abortions legal. An energy crisis results in higher unemployment. These examples are among the more obvious ways in which the decisions of government become intimate family matters.

Individuals who establish, carry out, or attempt to change the policies of government will be speaking at the seminar. They will be addressing themselves to such questions as: What is the impact of the decline of extended families, the growing number of working mothers, the work ethic, the mass media, the educational system, materialism, etc. on the family? What are the rights of children? How do we reorder national priorities? What is the government's attitude toward the poor and powerless? What role should the church play in influencing government? How can arbitrary policies that place hardships on families be changed? What can be done to strengthen and support families and communities?

Costs for the seminar will be kept to a minimum. Expenses for two luncheons, a dinner, and the registration fee will total \$10.00. Lodging can be arranged for less than \$6.00 per night. If you would like to receive more information on the seminar or send in your registration fee, clip and mail the form on the bottom of this page.

☐ Please send me more information on the May 7-8 Washington Seminar on the Family.

☐ I would like to attend the seminar. Enclosed is my \$10.00 registration fee.

Name _____

Address _____

Return form to:

MCC Peace Section Wash. Office
100 Maryland Ave. N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002

Suggestions for seminar content and/or format include: _____

How does one move, as Carole Hull writes, "beyond small group consciousness-raising to a guided study of Bible, theology, history, and current issues as they relate to women"? The two reports which follow, one on the seminary course and the other on a church study, provide guidelines for individuals who are outlining a curriculum or are interested in engaging their congregations in a serious study of women within a community of believers.

STUDY GROUP INITIATES DIALOGUE AT WALNUT CREEK

by

Harry Gerber, Jr., Marilyn Yoder, Simon Hershberger, Esta Hershberger, David Miller,
Lois Schlabach, Erv Schlabach

A group within our congregation began a study of "The Role of Men and Women in the Church" at the suggestion of one of the members. Some basic resources which we used were specific Scriptural texts and the study statements on "The Role of Women in the Church," prepared by the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries for discussion at Assembly '73. The bibliography at the end of the study statement provided further helpful suggestions. Articles from various Mennonite periodicals were also used. For example, we discussed "Women Must Become Part of the Total Life of the Church," by Margaret Loewen Reimer, and an editorial, "The Use of Scripture to Define the Role of Women," both of which appeared in the November 12 (1973) issue of the Mennonite Reporter.

The discussion of the group centered primarily around the cultivation of the spiritual gifts of both men and women in the congregation. There was a strong sense of the church's failure in this area. Although the group had no basic objection to the ordination of women, this was not a central issue and there was little interest expressed in this direction. It was the conviction of our group that the women in our congregation -- a majority of the membership, statistically -- are not adequately represented on the church council and other committees, i.e., on the level where many important decisions are made.

Three affirmations grew out of our study. (1) All persons are of equal status since they are created in the image of God, but they may have different roles. (Gen. 1:27, Gal. 3:28) (2) The spiritual gifts of all persons within the fellowship should be recognized and used in every aspect of church life. (Rom. 12:4-8, I Cor. 12:7-11) (3) All areas of membership should have proper representation on committees, church councils, and boards, so that the total vision of the church will become evident.

The study is still too recent for any tangible results to have become evident, although the insights of the group are being taken into consideration in present congregational planning. The study statement formulated by these members was brought to the attention of the whole congregation by an announcement in the church bulletin, as well as one from the pulpit. A copy of the results was placed upon the bulletin board.

Through our experience together we have found that a mixed group is most open and free to discuss if the group is not too large (no more than twelve persons). The context in which such a discussion takes place would have to be adapted to the situation of a particular congregation. It is essential that persons involved in such a study project take seriously their responsibility for advance preparation, in order that the meetings prove fruitful and conclusive.

We hope that others may learn through our experience, and that we in turn may grow through theirs, as we continue together to serve Christ.

*We would like to hear about your ideas, suggestions, responses. Send correspondence to:
Task Force on Women in Church and Society, MCC Peace Section, 21 S. 12th St., Akron, PA 17501.*

SEMINARY COURSE HEIGHTENS AWARENESS, SPAWNS NEW RESOLUTIONS

by Carole Hull

The fall elective offering, Women in Church and Society, came to a halt on Dec. 20 with a session for course evaluation and review. The class originally grew out of two ad hoc groups which met in '72-'73, one of women students, the other of seminarians' wives. These women sensed an urgency to move beyond small group consciousness-raising to a guided study of Bible, theology, history, and current issues as they relate to women. A course proposal was drawn up and approved, with a steering-planning committee of four students and one professor to run it. Fifty persons of different communities, interests, and occupations showed up for the first class and consistent attendance pointed to the popularity as well as the seriousness of the topic.

Here is a sampling of what took place, including student reactions to illustrate high points, deficiencies, and insights received.

1. Film and Introductory Input: "Growing Up Female," a documentary-style glimpse into the lives of six midwestern women.
2. Women in the Old Testament (Many of us had not been aware of the number of heroic women in the Old Testament, or of the possibility of a matriarchy between the flood and the kingdom, or of male dominance increasing in direct proportion to Israel's spiraling downward into power and warfare. In Gen. 2, woman can be seen as the climax of creation rather than as an afterthought.)
3. Women in the New Testament (Professor Josephine Ford's presentation on "Problem Passages in Paul" revealed the "maleness" of exegesis in general and the whole continuum of woman's struggle. Many male references could refer to a common gender. Paul, properly exegeted, does not come off as a misogynist! Professor John H. Yoder's lecture on "Revolutionary Subordination" didn't have a chance. Emotions ran high that evening. Some of us needed a deeper experience of liberation before an appreciation of Christ-like, willful subordination could take root.)
4. Church History to the Reformation: 30 A.D.-500 A.D.
5. Reformation and Anabaptist History
6. History of American Feminism
7. Christian Feminism
8. Women in Church Structures (Which comes first, women's readiness to assume responsibility or men's readiness to allow women responsibility?)
9. The Global Picture: Comparative Cultures (Cross-cultural comparison showed that the kind of work women cannot do in one society is just what they may be called upon to do in another.)
10. Women's Health Care; Reproduction, Family Planning, Abortion
11. Family Roles; Women's Traditional Professions (When/how will true partnership be expected in the family context?)
12. Human Sexuality in a Psychoanalytic Perspective (Psychic health was presented as the capacity to endure both the wish and the reality.)
13. Women and Welfare (Is welfare a right or a gift? It was observed that poor women have much more in common with poor men than with feminists. Are feminists really concerned about the liberation of all oppressed people of which their struggles are a part?)

The resource persons included 6 AMBS faculty (5 male, 1 female), 5 outside faculty (1 male, 4 female), 2 ordained women, 4 women working in church structures, 1 woman with Church Community Services, 1 male psychoanalyst, 1 male medical doctor, 2 social workers, male and female, 1 female schoolteacher, 7 women participants in the class, and 3 couples from the seminary community. Readings were required of everyone, and a paper due from credit students.

It is impossible to measure the impact of the course on all the participants. All would agree that it heightened awareness, raised hopes, channelled anger, revealed deeper frustrations, and spawned new resolutions. One student saw herself "more determined, discouraged (at points), dedicated, and probably dogmatic! I am more convinced of the rightness to devote energies to the attempt to help both men and women be all we can be, an impossibility in the present setting of imbalance. From some readings and Peggy Ann Way, I can better accept my (righteous?) anger and work with it."

From another: "One specific change of great significance came not in class, but in discussion afterwards. I realized that I was not really respecting my wife's choice to be what she is, a homemaker. I believe that this has already made a change in our relationship."

"You've given me too much theory and history and not enough practical help. Now that I am more sensitive to issues and problems, what can I do about them?"

"A valuable experience was to be taken beyond the "male-female" perspective into the Liberation-Salvation Dynamic by Rev. Peggy Way."

"At this point in my life I am more in touch with my emotions than my intellectual abilities. I feel I have gifts in being able to understand people and work with them. It seems most of my abilities lie in the affective rather than the cognitive domain. How much of this was culturally imposed, and, do I continue to work at the affective because it is the most comfortable and natural?"

"In grade school I competed with boys and was praised for my achievement. In high school I achieved with less dynamism for fear of not being accepted. In order to be dated I had to play dumb. Now I realize that both men and women would have affirmed my reaching the heights of my potential. My goal now is to be as great, capable, funny, and intelligent as I can."

Areas noticeably missing in course content included: (1) responsible consciousness-raising of the general public; (2) a stronger grappling with issues in the church itself; (3) tactics for change and dynamics of resocialization; (4) Christian attitudes toward sexuality; (5) the single woman; (6) the aging woman; (7) our black sisters; (8) the gay movement; (9) ordination; (10) divorce; (11) alternatives to marriage; (12) family planning; (13) sexism in literature.

An overwhelming number of participants requested that a course like this be kept as a separate, distinct one until instructors are willing and able to deal with the women's issues in their fields. "In no way does this kind of stuff get into other courses, except superficially in OT and NT." Most felt that integration of this material into the seminary curriculum would take several years to achieve, even though it is so crucial to every aspect of church life. All seminarians should be required to take the course. By keeping the course separate, it also serves in community outreach.

Some of us are left with a desire to liberate our society from excessive "masculine" traits such as dominance, aggressiveness, cold rationality, and power hunger. Christian feminists must not play the 'male' game in their liberation effort, but remember Jesus' strategy. He met and treated each woman as an equal, affirming her worth in spite of culturally imposed subordination, and showed that one can live freely in the old forms and celebrate the new by allowing the old to stand awhile.

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a whole new world." II Cor. 5:17

MARTHA SMITH REFLECTS ON OAK GROVE EXPERIENCE

Last summer Martha Smith served as a student intern at the Oak Grove Mennonite Church in Smithville, Ohio. She is presently employed as an associate chaplain at the LaJunta Medical Center, LaJunta, CO. She writes: "My work is very rewarding. I have discovered little resistance in terms of my being a woman and filling a traditionally male role." Below is Martha's account of her summer at Oak Grove.

While working with a group of people who are interested in the work of God's kingdom, it became more apparent to me that liberation includes all persons, male and female. Liberation means to be released to develop our gifts in order to bring about the kingdom of God as introduced to us by Christ. As these gifts are discovered, they are recognized, affirmed, and developed within this supportive community. To become liberated within the community context allows for greater freedom in expressing these gifts. This is what was especially exciting for me. The congregation recognized, affirmed, and encouraged me to develop those gifts which were a part of me and which would enhance their growth as well as mine.

In addition, it was a very freeing experience to realize that discipleship is not a burdensome life style, but a joyful one. It requires that we be true to God in imitating Christ by using our gifts and potential in a manner which is congruent with who we are. It is a depth of being which comes about only in obedience to that which God has called us to.

It is an excitingly difficult venture to be involved in some new frontiers within our church. I am becoming more aware that our goal dare not be one of competing amongst ourselves as women, or against men. It is our responsibility to make an effort to measure up to the plans God has designed for us as individual women, the plans God has for us as a corporate body of women, but above all the plans God has for the entire body of believers within the Christian church. May God give us the courage to take that responsibility seriously.

THE STATUS OF WIDOWS IN THE CHURCH

by Miriam L. Weaver

The Task Force would like to share Miriam L. Weaver's perspective on the status of widows in the church as part of our continuing study of the relationship of women to the Mennonite Church. Miriam is with the Business-Secretarial Dept. at Eastern Mennonite College.

What's the Problem?

What is the status of middle-aged widows in the church? Is it necessary to discuss it? In 1964 the Civil Rights Act became law. Title VII of the Act, the Equal Employment Opportunity Title, forbids any employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Why is it that this initiative had to come from the legislative branch of our government rather than from the Christian church, which has long proclaimed the liberating power of the gospel in all aspects of life, especially in raising the position of women to an honorable and respectable place from the status of being virtually chattel or slaves?

What is the church doing? For all the lip service being given to the equality of men and women as "heirs together of the grace of God," there still exists a well-defined authority hierarchy in the church which places men in leadership roles and women into mostly home-related roles. The supporting evidence for such a system is taken from Paul's teachings on headship and order -- God, Christ, man, woman. From this passage it is understood that certain tasks belong exclusively to men -- the preaching ministry, membership on church boards, councils, and committees, and all major decision-making, including decisions about who shall make decisions. So unless men themselves have decided to place women on these decision-making bodies, women's voices are not heard, except in WMSC, as Sunday School teachers, and related roles traditionally assigned to them.

STATUS OF WIDOWS, cont.

If I read my middle-aged women friends correctly, they are saying something like this: "We do not wish to dominate church organizations, but we wish to be heard, to have our opinions listened to, respected, and given equal weight with the opinions of men." In our assemblies it frequently happens that no matter how sound, how reasonable, how convincing a point a woman may make, it is taken less seriously than if a man said it. Obviously this doesn't make sense.

A New Look at Gifts

Many thoughtful persons are wondering out loud: "Is there a positive side with reference to women's place in the church which has been overlooked, a recognition of the talents and spiritual gifts of women?" The Apostle Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts does not seem to indicate that such gifts come to men only. Men and women alike have direct access to God through Christ and receive guidance from the Holy Spirit. Both men and women have gifts which need to be affirmed and cultivated. The trouble is that some of these gifts overlap; God has not neatly divided them along sex lines. Women have traditionally been recognized as good teachers and homemakers, but what if they have gifts of organization, administration, or decision-making, do they hide these talents? Women in general and many widows in particular have to fill such roles in the public sector. Widows fill a dual father-mother role in their homes, have experience in home management, child care and training, financial management, business and professional careers. Why should the exercise of these gifts never be called upon in church settings? The discernment of spiritual gifts in others is a gift itself. Should there not be much more discovery, affirmation, and cultivation of these gifts in women?

New Patterns for Widows in Church Life

Gray hair, bifocals, children growing up and leaving home are sometimes traumatic for women as far as their feelings of self-worth are concerned, but then add to that the loss of a husband and you have a potentially devastating experience. At this point widows feel a two or three-pronged rejection. They listen to hundreds of sermons, seminars, class discussions and the like, in which married people's problems are aired, in which the assumption is made that the adult listeners are all living in the state of matrimony. Why not for a change turn the tables and let the married people listen, really listen, as widows speak to them about their concerns, problems, frustrations, and also their joys and ways they have found of coping with various realities of widowhood.

Another prong is the sex-role discrimination which widows share alike with all other women--less participation in church decision-making, or no voice at all. To remedy this situation, men need to learn how to listen graciously to women's viewpoints by including them on the decision-making bodies of the church. A willingness to try new patterns would be refreshing and profitable for all.

It must be recognized that some widows prefer to sit quietly within the group; they do not want to see any changes in the men-women roles. Such women should be encouraged to speak if they have something to say, but they should not be made to feel guilty if they would rather listen. Married women bear some responsibility here, too, for unwittingly hurting their widowed sisters by their insinuations that women who work outside the home are somehow missing their highest calling. It would be better for them to reserve their judgments and to recognize that some women are called to go outside their homes and work with the public just as surely as others are called to be full-time homemakers, and most widows have no choice. Christian charity is needed in all of these situations.

It is time for the church to put into practice the "heirs together of the grace of life," and "being knit together in love," concepts, and let them permeate church life. How good and how pleasant that would be!

FOR A LIBERATING EXPERIENCE READ . . .

THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF MOTHERS by Angela Barron McBride, New York: Harper and Row, 158 pages.

The Task Force wants to thank Marjorie Ropp, 526 Bruce St., Conway, Arkansas 72032 for sending us her excellent review of the book The Growth and Development of Mothers. According to Marjorie, reading Angela Barron McBride's book "is one of the most liberating experiences I have had. This book had such a profound influence on me, my first impulse was to send a copy to every other struggling, guilt-ridden young Mennonite mother that I knew. That not being possible, I settled on writing a review in hopes that other parents will benefit from this book too."

"NORMAL CRAZY EMOTIONS"

It's evening. The kids are finally asleep. My foremost feelings are exhaustion, resentment, anger, and guilt. I think, "If I'm so angry, then I'm a rotten mother. If I'm depressed, then I'm an unsuccessful wife. If I feel guilty, then I've done something bad." I'm full of contradictions: I want my children to be generous but not give any of their new toys away. I want them to learn to be friendly and hospitable, but I can't stand to have the neighbor kids in the house for more than 5 minutes. I'm angry at my three-year-old's clumsiness, but I spill things myself.

These are what Angela Barron McBride, a teacher of psychiatric nursing and mother of two, calls "normal crazy emotions," present in all mothers, but contrary to what child-rearing literature and popular opinion hold up as ideal or good behavior. This book is a call for more understanding of oneself and one's feelings. It is a call for a re-evaluation of the social mythology surrounding motherhood. Once mothers begin to develop emotional self-awareness and face their ambivalence toward their children, they can attempt to make changes in their thinking and develop in their role as mothers. Negative feelings cannot be entirely eliminated, but we can learn how to hand them better.

"THE MOTHERHOOD MYSTIQUE"

While most books for young parents center on the needs of the child, McBride's book deals with the conflicts and problems of the parent. She analyzes the common attitudes towards mothers which she calls "the motherhood mystique" and the effects these have on mothers and their children. For example, the idea that motherhood is woman's ultimate fulfillment is common in professional and popular literature. (A man, by contrast, is not fulfilled in fatherhood, but in accomplishments in the outside world.) "Baby as ultimate fulfillment comes to mean that you have very limited possibilities for satisfaction once past childbearing." Women come to expect much more from being a mother than they can ever get. This false expectation leads to frustration, the "normal crazy" feelings, and doubt as to one's normality as a woman.

McBride examines the reasons why couples have babies. She contends the reasons stem from their desire for their own pleasure rather than because "they love children." A woman has a baby because she's tired of working, it makes her an adult in the world's eyes, she is fighting loneliness, or it's just the "thing to do." Motherhood, without much training or preparation, follows directly on engagement, wedding, and honeymoon--one of the most self-centered periods in a woman's life. A new mother's first job is to learn to live with ambivalence.

In the American family, the sex roles have developed so that the mother is almost completely responsible for raising the children. The father's role is to support the family economically, and the mother's responsibility is to provide food, clothing, and "keep everyone happy." As McBride says, "Talk about impossible jobs!" The assumption is that if you are a good mother, you'll produce happy children. McBride shows how social pressures on a mother for perfection lead her in turn to make unrealistic demands on her children.

BOOK REVIEW, cont.

She calls for parents to free themselves from stereotyped thinking. One parent should not be solely responsible for the kind of person the child becomes. Children can learn good human values from both sexes. "What is 'proper' to girls and boys should be de-emphasized." What is essential to full human development is important.

"ALTERNATIVES"

The expectations and frustrations of the mother are related to the values of the society she lives in. If McBride's book were taken seriously by American parents, it would be nothing short of revolutionary for our society. She contends we must demand social change to encourage the maximum development of human potential. She suggests alternatives to the nuclear family and experimenting with different life styles.

A communal living situation, for example with part-time jobs outside the community for both fathers and mothers would allow for several innovations in family living. Fathers would share equally in the responsibility of child care and the monotony of housework. Women's contacts with the outside world would provide for developing other parts of her personality and a rise in self-esteem. The children would benefit from contact with more than one or two adults. The emphasis would be on enjoying and cooperating with others rather than seeking to surpass them as has been the rule in our society. Above all, life-styles and roles must not be restrictive or human potential is stifled.

Although this book is not a child-rearing manual, it contains page after page of practical advice. Rarely will you find such lively wit, entertaining humor, and common sense combined in a book as readable as this one. Time and again, I found myself laughing with release as McBride described with such humor the very feelings I have felt so guilty about. Reading The Growth and Development of Mothers is one of the most liberating experiences I have had.

TASK FORCE CONTINUES WORK ON PACKET

In the last Report we announced that the Task Force is preparing a packet of articles relating to women in church and society. The packet should be ready for distribution by the first of April. Look in the April-May Report for a description of the packet's content, cost, distribution, and other details. A number of the articles, to be published for the first time, have been written by Mennonite women. We are considering putting some poetry in the packet. Art work and poems would be welcomed additions to the packet and any of the Reports.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Lois Eckman, Lancaster, PA informs us that a consciousness-raising (discussion and support group) for Mennonite women of all ages starts Thursday, March 7, 7:30 at the Women's Center, 230 W. Chestnut St., Lancaster, PA.
- "The Woman Packet," prepared by Church Women United is a good introduction to the concerns of Christian feminists. Copies of the packet are available through the office of the General Conference Mennonite Church, 722 Main St., Box 347, Newton, KS 67114. Cost: \$2.00 per packet.
- The workshop on "Masculine/Feminine Roles," to be held at Goshen College's Center for Discipleship on February 22-23, has been postponed. Some related emphasis will likely be included in the Fall 1974 schedule.